DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 236 CS 506 178

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TITLE An Analysis of Controversial Role Fulfillment of TV News Commentators during Times of Crisis.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Television; Journalism; *News Media; News Reporting; *Press Opinion; *Role Perception; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Broadcast Journalism; Controversial Topics; Journalism Research; Media Bias; Media Coverage; Media Ethics; *News Commentators; *Press Role; Role Evaluation; Television Networks; Television News

ABSTRACT

To assess the roles of TV news commentators during times of crisis, a study examined network news commentary during the 10 days following each of three crises--Spiro Agnew's resignation (October 10, 1973), the Saturday Night Massacre (October 22, 1973), and the seizure of the American merchant ship "Mayaguez" by Cambodians (May 11, 1975). The study was carried out in three major steps: (1) development of criteria for roles; (2) refinement of role criteria; and (3) application of roles to newscast transcripts to determine role fulfillment. Seven possible roles--developed by searching relevant literature, consulting with media critics, and interviewing commentators--included "explain the cause," "explore repercussions," "reflect on the press," "explicitly advocate," and "criticize government without explicitly advocating." Media critics were asked to study the list of possible roles, read 12 of the 26 transcripts, identify roles, refine roles, possibly add roles to the list, and discuss their analysis. Finally, the study analyzed the 14 remaining transcripts to determine role fulfillment. Three roles--"predict," "take the pulse," and "explicitly advocate government policy"--which elicited disagreement between news commentators and media critics concerning their appropriateness, were analyzed in depth. Results indicated that news commentators often did not meet their own role expectations. (Two tables of data are included, and 59 references are appended.) (MM)

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Radio-Television Journalism Division
American Educators In Journalism and Mass Communication
Annual Convention
Portland, Oregon
July 1988

CS 506 178

An Analysis of Controversial Role Fulfillment of TV News Commentators During Times of Crisis

by

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This study examines network news commentary at a unique period in history because at no other time has a representative of government been more critical of the press, and never before have both a Vice President and a President resigned. Therefore, it is altogether important and reasonable to examine the roles of the TV news commentators during this period, the 10 days following each of three crises: Spiro Agnew's resignation (October 10, 1973), the Saturday Night Massacre (October 22, 1973), and the seizure of the American merchant ship Mayaguez by Cambodians (May 11, 1975).

Any weekday evening, network news programs are seen in about 25 million households ("The First Amendment").

In addition, part of the program--the labeled news commentary--seems to be of special interest to policy makers who have one eye on the policy and another on the reactions of news commentators at the networks (Mikelson 191).

It has been suggested that these TV news commentators--those who instantly analyze the news--have tremendous power but no one is examining what they do (Feuer 874).

Policy makers, however, are watching what they do. In 1969, Vice President Spiro Agnew publicly questioned the role of the broadcast journalist: Is he obliged to represent the

views of America? Is he supposed to articulate a diversity of viewpoints? These questions concern news commentary and the role of news analysis. Agnew's questions revived a newsroom-level debate about the role of the broadcast journalist, elevated it to a national level, and prompted many journalists to seriously question their role (Knappman 17).

Research Questions

According to Graber, the roles news commentators play are neither trivial nor ignored by the public, particularly in times of crisis. Yet the TV news studies of Adams, Efron, Epstein, Gans, and LeFever virtually ignore labeled news commentary. And except for one study by Nimmo and Combs, the way broadcast journalists perform during a crisis has received relatively little attention. This study was undertaken to partially correct this deficiency; that is, to determine: (1) What roles are prescribed for TV news commentators? (2) How do TV news commentators perceive their communicative roles? and (3) How do they fulfill those roles in selected commentaries during crisis periods?

"TV news commentary" refers to the labeled segment of the network evening news program where a veteran journalist is permitted to go beyond mere reporting and act as a "commentator." "Roles" refers to communication behavior which seems appropriate in view of the demands and expectations of the position.

Four commentators performed on network news from 1973

to 1975: David Brinkley, Harry Reasoner, Eric Sevareid and Howard K. Smith. These commentators were chosen because they represented the total population of those featured on the three major evening news programs. Focusing on four commentators allowed the investigator to compare and contrast the role as played by different personalities broadcasting during the same three crises.

In addition to being a unique period in history, the crises were selected because Nimmo and Combs, Graber, Pride, and Schramm indicate it is then that people turn to TV in greater numbers for information and interpretation. And it is in times of crisis that role fulfillment, particularly controversial roles, may have greater impact.

The Significance of the Study

Such a study contributes to research knowledge in broadcast journalism in these ways:

(1) it expands the research on roles when broadcast journalists were seriously questioning theirs (Huntley);

(2) it may contribute to the development of role theory by testing Gans's theory that practitioners' descriptions of their own roles may be misleading. If Gans is correct, then the analysis will reveal that TV news commentators almost always practiced what they preached--thus, indicating that their self-perceptions were self-serving or, as Gans might say, misleading. If the analysis reveals that commentators often fail to meet their own role expectations, then Gans's theory, as applied to network TV

news commentators, may be rejected.

Method

This study was carried out in three major steps: (1) development of criteria for roles, (2) refinement of role criteria, and (3) application of roles to the transcripts to determine role fulfillment.

Role theory (Sarbin & Allen) suggests that many demands which a role imposes upon a commentator--especially those of his superiors-- become internalized in the socialization process in the newsroom and, thus, the demands of the position eventually become personal norms. Gans and Epstein have suggested that an individual commentator's role expectations are strongly influenced by his desire to please his superiors.

Development Of Roles

Development of roles entailed searching the literature, consulting with media critics, and interviewing commentators.

The literature search was guided by two questions: What roles were prescribed for news commentators by media critics and how do news commentators perceive their communicative role? A list of role behaviors first was developed from an examination of newspapers, periodicals, theses, dissertations, and scholarly or trade journals in the areas of broadcasting and journalism.

Studies of news commentators revealed that many media

critics prescribed similar roles. R. Rutherford Smith and Chester suggested that news commentators state their biases, consider a wide range of topics, and avoid riding one issue like a hobby horse. Kilpatrick and Von Hoffman emphasized the need for each network to have several news commentators, each with different views. Goodman and Shayon suggested that commentators have an obligation to prod the listener to use his critical powers and to penetrate the public relations veneer of policy makers. MacNeil, Sanderlin, and Wood called for more news commentary during times of crisis. Hagerty and Hulteng said the news commentator should explain why things happen and what they might lead to.

Occasionally, media critics' prescriptions contradicted each other. For example, Von Hoffman was concerned that the TV news commentators were not able to function like newspaper editorialists. But Stanton said news commentators should be forbidden to editorialize, that is, forbidden to "talk about things as they ought to be" (Hulteng 141). Similarly, Huntley said "nor is it journalism's function to find solutions to political, social and economic dislocations" (7).

Nevertheless, media critics appear to agree on how TV news commentary should be presented. For example, Ashmore, Gould, Kilpatrick, McDonald, Reynolds, and Murrow (Wood) suggested that the viewer deserves an assessment not a two-sided debate of a complex issue.

Bagdikian not only prescribed a role but also suggested

how it should be fulfilled. He said a sound way to make a prediction is to "state the conditions under which it might materialize" (35). Bray prescribed a pulse taking role when he said TV news commentators have an obligation to report the feelings of citizens. And Rule said TV news commentators ought to reflect on their own performance.

Thus, media critics appeared to prescribe a myriad collection of roles--some contradictory--which may be summarized in the following way:

- state biases
- don't just ride one issue like a hobby horse
- predict
- explore repercussions
- do more commentary during crisis periods
- explain the causes
- penetrate the public relations veneer of policy makers by questioning and criticizing
- openly declare the premises of arguments
- take the pulse
- take a stand on an issue rather than exploring both sides
- talk about things as they ought to be
- prod listeners to use their critical powers
- don't talk about things as they ought to be
- don't try to find solutions to society's problems

The second question guiding the literature search was: how do TV news commentators perceive their communicative

role? Two studies give a partial answer. Howard K. Smith told Klose he tried to fulfill these three roles:

- sympathize with the President regardless of party
- show no sympathy to Congress
- provoke thought by introducing different viewpoints

Eric Sevareid told D'Arienzo he tried to accomplish these:

- explain more than an advocate
- limit subjects to hard news

This extended list was reduced to seven principal roles by combining overlapping terms. Four media critics were interviewed by the investigator and were in substantial agreement on this reduced list: explain the cause, predict, explore repercussions, reflect on the press, take the pulse, explicitly advocate government policy, and criticize government policy.

The media critics were: Robert MacNeil, author of The People Machine , co-host of "The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour"; Nicholas Von Hoffman, syndicated columnist, a former participant in CBS's "60 Minutes' Point-Counterpoint;" Charles Seib, ombudsman for Washington Post, and media critic for Washington Post News Service; Robert Lewis Shayon, former TV critic for Saturday Review, and author of Open to Criticism.

The final aspect in the development of roles was one of the unique contributions of this study. Interviews were conducted with David Brinkley, Harry Reasoner, Eric Sevareid and Howard K. Smith to determine: How do the network TV news commentators broadcasting during crisis periods in 1973

and 1975 perceive their communicative roles?

During the interview with each news commentator (in June 1978), the principal author showed the list of roles (with definitions and cue words) and asked if, and to what extent, the commentator subscribed to each of the seven roles.

Media critics and news commentators agreed on these roles: explain the cause--directly explain how the crisis came to be, why it happened; explore repercussions--talk about any number of things that might or may happen; reflect on the press--redefine or evaluate the performance of print or electronic media; criticize government policy--make a value judgment about the past or present policy without saying what ought to be done.

However, media critics and news commentators disagreed on the following roles, labeled "controversial," which will be analyzed in depth:

1. Predict: talk about what will happen or what the prospect is, that is, settling on one specific course of action. The underlined cue words were used to identify instances of role fulfillment.
2. Take the Pulse: tell the people what the people think without providing attribution. When the apparent thoughts or feelings of a group of people outside of the administration were reported, without any explicit reference to the source of information, an instance of pulse

taking was recorded. This role was identified by cue words: "the people," "voters," "a majority of Americans," "everyone," "the nation," "the public," "the country."

3. Explicitly advocate government policy: overtly advocate what government policy/action should be. This is the strongest form of criticism of government. Not to be confused with endorsing present government policy, it implies strong dissatisfaction with present policy and pleads for a substantially different course of action. This role was identified by the following cue words when such words indicated the commentator's judgment about the preferable course of events in the future: "must," "should," "ought to," "has to," "have to," or "the solution is," "I suggest."

The commentators' answers are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 About Here

Refinement Of Roles

The next major aspect of this study was to refine the roles. This was done by:

- obtaining videotapes from the TV News Archives at Vanderbilt University and transcribing 26 crisis-related commentaries broadcast in the 10 days following each crisis;

• asking a second group of media critics to study the list of seven major possible roles, read 12 (of 26) transcripts, identify the roles, refine the roles, possibly add roles to the list, and discuss individually their analysis with the principal author. These eight media critics were TV critics writing for newspapers or editorial writers or journalism educators.

Those media critics were: James Clemon, editorial page editor, Omaha World Herald, Secretary of National Association of Editorial Writers; Dr. Paul Smeyak, Professor of Broadcasting, University of Kansas with ten years experience as a professional broadcaster; Jeff McCall, News and Public Affairs Director, KXCV-FM with an M.A. in Speech Communication; Dr. Robert Bohlken, Professor of Speech and Mass Media, Northwest Missouri State University; Dr. Warren Francke, Professor of Journalism, University of Nebraska at Omaha and media critic for Omaha Sun papers; Dr James Klumpp, Professor, University of Nebraska at Lincoln and teacher of Rhetorical Criticism and the Social and Political Effects of Communication; Steve Nicely, Television Critic for the Kansas City Star; Joyce Wagner, former Television Critic for the Kansas City Star, then the editor and publisher of CityMagazine.

During their analysis, media critics had no knowledge of the four commentators' role perceptions. To them, it was a list of possible roles.

To test reliability of the role identifiers (the cue

words), the media critics recorded every instance of role fulfillment. Sometimes several may have occurred in one commentary. Thus, a commentary containing three instances of prediction counted as one.

Application Of Roles To Transcripts

The author re-analyzed the 12 transcripts himself in light of the clarification and refinements offered by the media critics. Then he analyzed the 14 remaining transcripts to determine role fulfillment. The following question guided the analysis: In how many commentaries and with what words did each commentator meet his own expectation on each role. The extent of fulfillment is expressed as a fraction:

$$\text{Extent of Fulfillment} = \frac{\text{Number of Commentaries Where the Expectation Was Met}}{\text{Total Number Examined}}$$

Findings

Eric Sevareid said "the role of the TV news commentator is not something you can pin to the wall like a butterfly" (Interview). That comment notwithstanding, this investigation found that the roles prescribed by the media critics and the commentators themselves coincided on 4 of 7 major roles (explain the cause, explore repercussions, reflect on the press, and criticize government) and that the commentators most generally fulfilled these roles on the air in times of crisis.

Regarding Vice President Spiro Agnew's questioning of the role of the broadcast journalist, this study found that media critics and commentators felt the network news

commentator is neither obliged to represent the views of America nor supposed to articulate a diversity of viewpoints.

On the controversial roles (take the pulse, predict, and explicitly advocate), the commentators did not always practice what they preached. Nor did they always agree with media critics on the appropriateness of these particular roles. (See Table 2)

Controversial Role #1: Predict

Role expectation. Though media critics suggested predicting be de-emphasized or avoided, the news commentators were divided. Brinkley and Smith said they approved of predicting; Reasoner and Sevareid said they avoided it.

Role fulfillment. Surprisingly, in seven of 10 commentaries Sevareid predicted after saying he usually did not. Thus he emulated Mark Twain, who said "I can resist everything but temptation." Howard K. Smith approved of the predicting role yet predicted in only one of eight commentaries. Harry Reasoner met his own expectation when he avoided predicting in each of three commentaries. David Brinkley, an approver of prediction, predicted in three of five commentaries. Thus, on the prediction role, they practiced what they preached in 10 of 26 commentaries. Eleven predictions occurred.

Controversial Role #2: Take the Pulse

Role Expectation. To take the pulse was to tell the people what the people think without providing attribution. Media critics disapproved of this role. The commentators,

however, were divided. Smith accepted it. Sevareid and Brinkley rejected the role. Reasoner also rejected it, saying he does not take the pulse but states his own feelings which he feels represent part of the pulse.

Role Fulfillment. Brinkley and Reasoner met their own role expectations when they avoided taking the pulse in four of five and two of three commentaries, respectively. Sevareid took the pulse in five of 10 commentaries and, to that extent, failed to meet his own role expectation. Smith met his own expectation when he took the pulse three of eight times. Thus, on the pulse taking role, the commentators practiced what they preached in 14 of 26 commentaries. The commentators appeared to take the pulse in 10 of the 26 commentaries.

Controversial Role #3: Explicitly Advocate

Role Expectation. To explicitly advocate government policy is to overtly advocate what government policy should be. Smith seemed to accept explicit advocacy as a major role; Sevareid considered it minor; Brinkley and Reasoner rejected it.

Role Fulfillment. Smith, meeting his own expectation, advocated in five of eight commentaries. Sevareid, approving as a minor role, advocated in four of 10 commentaries. Brinkley and Reasoner met their own expectation when they avoided advocacy. Thus, on the advocacy role, the commentators practiced what they preached in 17 of 26 commentaries. The content analysis showed the commentators

advocated in nine of 26 commentaries--all by Sevareid and Smith who said they did.

On October 20, 1973, Nixon fired Special Watergate Prosecutor Archibald Cox and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus. The same day, Attorney General Eliot Richardson resigned in protest. Eleven days later the following commentary was heard on ABC:

> Smith (10/31/73): Either the Congress or the President by his own patriotic decision should relieve the nation of a burden that has grown too heavy to carry any longer. (TV News Archives)

Thus, Howard K. Smith was the first TV news commentator to call for Nixon's resignation. Since he had been the TV newsman closest to President Nixon (as of 1973), this commentary surprised people.

Table 2 About Here

Discussion

Brinkley failed to meet his own expectation when he took the pulse once during the Saturday Night Massacre. In fairness to him, if there are occasions during which prevailing public opinion needs no explicit attribution, this might have been one. Consider this: the Saturday Night Massacre (10/20/73) created "a public outcry, followed by no fewer than eighty-four Congressional resolutions for impeachment of the President" (Barrett 28).

Because the pulse taking role asks the viewer to accept a news commentator's conclusion about the nation's mood without any evidence, it seems that the commentator can express his own opinion under the pretense of taking the pulse of the people.

Regarding Smith's advocacy of Nixon's resignation, Smith worked for years at CBS but resigned in 1961 after a dispute with the network president about commentary. That controversy might be explained by examining the CBS News guidelines:

> An editorial [which is not permitted] recommends a course of action . . . while an analysis [which is permitted] . . . interprets the meaning of events and seeks to answer such questions as what has caused the event and what its consequences may be (CBS, 7).

Thus, since recommending a course of action (or explicit advocacy) is forbidden on CBS, it is easy to see why Howard K. Smith, with his intense feelings about the importance of advocacy, switched to ABC.

Role conflict may be one of the factors responsible for the failure of news commentators to meet their own expectations on a particular role. Gans and Epstein have suggested that an individual commentator's role expectations are strongly influenced by his desire to please his superiors. The commentators declare that they think their own thoughts and write their own phrases. Role theory (Sarbin & Allen) suggests that many demands which a role imposes upon a

commentator--especially those of his superiors-- become internalized in the socialization process in the newsroom and, thus, the demands of the position eventually become personal norms.

Why does it matter whether commentators meet their own expectations on a particular role? Gans suggested that an analysis based on self-perceptions may be naive or misleading. If his theory is correct, then this analysis would have revealed that news commentators almost always meet their own role expectations--indicating that their role expectations were self-serving. In fact, this analysis showed the opposite--that news commentators often did not meet their own role expectations. This means that Gans's theory, as it applies to these network TV news commentators, must be rejected.

This study did not examine impact. The commentators say it is difficult to measure. These "Wise Heads" believe that their persuasive powers are exaggerated because, as Brinkley says, "the American people are slow to believe anything they don't believe already" (Interview).

Nevertheless, TV news commentators are closely watched by policy makers. During crisis periods Presidents have taken down what commentators say, have phoned their complaints, have invited them to the White House to discuss their commentaries, have even fed rebuttals to favorite syndicated newspaper columnists (Stroud). It is clear that when policy is made, the reaction of these wise men is considered (Bagdikian).

A vast audience that depends on TV news for information is the added ingredient that leads some critics to suggest that these commentators are politically powerful. Congressmen may make laws, but how commentators influence public opinion which makes law making possible is an area that bears more examination.

Implications

Based on this study, researchers of commentators might consider the following suggestions: First, solicit live audiences' responses to commentaries. Perhaps only when the commentary is examined at the moment of delivery can scholars determine whether Aristotelian assumptions about ethos are applicable to those we invite into our living rooms via TV during periods of government crisis. In The Rhetoric of American Politics, Smith said:

> We may, for example, agree that what a man says makes sense, but we may reject his conclusions because we feel he is speaking out of turn. This is frequently the attitude that many people take toward those who criticize policies of the national government in times of national emergency (12).

A second area of study would be local TV news commentators. Perhaps their perceptions of their roles are quite different.

In this turbulent age, the media need not manufacture crises for commentary. How the pivotal commentators define and refine their roles are likely to be of continuing

interest to both the public and the critics.

TABLE 1
PROFILE OF ROLE EXPECTATIONS

* = Accepted as appropriate x = should not emphasize it or should try to avoid it

Possible Roles	Most Media Critics	DB	HR	ES	HKS
1. Explain the Cause	*	*	*	*	*
2. Predict	X	*	X	X	*
3. Explore Repercussions	*	*	?	*	*
4. Reflect on the Press	*	*	*	*	*
5. Take the Pulse	X	X	X	X	*
6. Explicitly Advocate	X	X	X	*	*
7. Criticize Government Without Explicitly Advocating	*	*	*	*	*

Underlined Roles are "controversial" and are analyzed in depth.

TABLE 2
ROLE EXPECTATIONS AND ROLE FULFILLMENT

*=Accepted as appropriate

x=Should not emphasize it or should try to avoid it

Extent of Role Fulfillment = Number of commentaries expectation was met / Number of commentaries Examined

	Commentators			
	DB	HR	ES	HKS
PREDICT	*	x	x	*
The extent to which he met his own expectation	3-5	3-3	3-10	1-8
TAKE THE PULSE	x	x	x	*
The extent to which he met his own expectation	4-5	2-3	5-10	3-8
EXPLICITLY ADVOCATE	x	x	*	*
The extent to which he met his own role expectation	5-5	3-3	4-10	5-8

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